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Killer Squads, Liars and Mad

That quiet Sunday television interlude before the onslaught of football, a time given over to the earnest sobriety of Washington interviews with public figures, has been broken at last. In place of ABC's *Issues and Answers*, there now looms the hour-long *This Week with David Brinkley*, the creation of ABC's hustling *Roone Arledge*, who also invented Monday Night Football. After a wobbly start, the Brinkley show looks like a true innovation in television journalism. In its eerie interview by satellite with Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and then in its commentary afterward—which matched Gaddafi word for fiery word—the Brinkley show made news and taught a lesson in the hazards of instant commentary.

ABC got its timely scoop by hastily deciding (on Arledge's orders, at 1 a.m. Saturday) to switch to Gaddafi as guest. In slightly fractured English, Gaddafi scornfully denied that he had sent a killer squad to the U.S. Neither his word nor his record entitles him to credence, yet in the next hour nobody on the program even mentioned, let alone discussed his denial. Perhaps it was Gaddafi's appearance that was so scary, as he huddled, dressed in collarless brown shirt and engulfed in a blue cape. As his head bobbed upward and backward, his eyes rolling up to the heavens, he looked like a Monty Python imitation of an Arab weirdo.

"It is not our character, not our behavior to assassinate any person," Gaddafi said. "It is the behavior of America, preparing to assassinate me, to poison my food. They tried many things to do this . . . You are a superpower. How are you afraid? . . . America must get rid of this Administration . . . as they did with Nixon, and elect another respectful President to get respect for America. . . . He is silly, he is ignorant. . . . Reagan is liar." His interviewer, in Tripoli, ABC's Lou Cioffi, asked Gaddafi what message he had for Reagan. "I would have to tell him: Are you mad?"

Back now to a Washington described by Brinkley as "something like an armed camp" (shots of snipers on the White House roof). Usually Brinkley's panel of journalists—now reduced to a manageable three—interview the guest, then discuss the news among themselves. In place of the distant Gaddafi, they now turned to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, acting Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who came on strong: "Right off, David, the President of the United States is not a liar. The dictator of Libya is a liar." There was "concrete evidence" that since 1977 Gaddafi had "targeted" U.S. officials. "He's a dictator, he's mad . . . a dangerous man."

Brinkley has been seeking a panel of interviewers who would "set off rockets," and he may be getting close. For this, chemistry is all—the chemistry that produced Huntley-Brinkley, or on football Mondays offers the ill-assorted, oddly compatible Frank Gifford, Howard Cosell and Dandy Don Meredith. Perhaps Brinkley and Arledge hoped for someone as abrasive as Cosell in choosing Ben Bradlee, the executive editor of the *Washington Post*.

Bradlee only wanted to question, not pontificate. Having to spend long hours getting out his paper, he seemed like someone who, in the jargon of diplomacy, knows the "heads

of topics" but not the de really a great expert in t should disqualify him fr tators. The expertise w George Will, intelligent, who sometimes cannot c ity. Finally, there is Brinkley, who for all his wry, clipped delivery is not a tough questioner (violence is for linemen, not quarterbacks). He brings a Southern courtly courtesy to his treatment of guests. Brinkley asked Moynihan if he had any doubts about the "killer squads."

Moynihan: At about a .8 probability . . .

Will: Senator, a .8 probability is more probability than we usually base Government actions on; therefore, this is a serious threat . . . would you favor word being given to Gaddafi, quietly, that any violence done to an American official will be reciprocated against him?

Moynihan: Well, I'll do it publicly right now. He should understand that there will be the most severe consequences . . . At minimum, I think it's time we just stopped buying a barrel of that Libyan oil . . .

Will: But, Senator, isn't that a pretty tame reprisal against a threat to the life of the senior officials of this republic, to quit buying his products?

Moynihan: Well . . . I don't think we should be in the business right

now, George, of detailing on some hierarchy of response . . . they should know it's going to be exceeding unpleasant. We are not going to allow a murderer to be head of state and go about murdering other people.

Since "the quality of information from the CIA is so important" in this case, Bradlee asked Moynihan, "do you have confidence in Director [William] Casey, who was described this week as 'not unfit'? Is that good enough?" A master of calculated flamboyance, Moynihan can also be prudent. He avoided the question, then said, "He has the confidence of the President, and let us go on now to have him pay attention to his work, which he certainly is doing."

Thank you, Senator.

Brinkley turned to his panelists: "Killer squads. It sounds like something out of a comic book, or one of those novels off the wire racks at the airport. Does it make any sense to you?" Bradlee volunteered that since Gaddafi had called Reagan a liar and challenged him, "if, at the proper moment, the President can take up that challenge, I would think this guy's days would begin to be numbered."

Will: . . . Can the Western world be taken seriously in its rhetoric about terrorism, and indeed in its determination to survive, if a mad dog on the streets of the world, such as Gaddafi, is allowed to go on like this? . . .

Bradlee: How would you do it, George? Would you send somebody in there and knock him off?

Will: . . . How about a message—short, cryptic message—with a pedigree in American history: Reagan alive or Gaddafi dead?

Perhaps the learned historical reference is what distinguishes this talk from that heard from any Joe Sixpack in a neighborhood bar. Perhaps.



Brinkley and Gaddafi via satellite